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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 532nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 8 October 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

REPORTS ON THE WORK OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE (agenda item 5)

(a) INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION (A/AC.96/898 and 905)

(b) PROGRAMME, ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL MATTERS (A/AC.96/896, 897, 903, 905 and 910)

1. Mr. LEBEDEV (Russian Federation), referring to the Note on International Protection (A/AC.96/898), said that he wished to look at the challenge involved in narrowing the gap between theory and practice in the light of Russia's experience of refugee protection and of the regulation of their legal status. Much had been accomplished by the Russian Federation in the six years that it had been conducting a dialogue with UNHCR on protection issues, including accession to the 1951 Convention, the adoption of two acts on refugees and of legislation to implement them, the creation of infrastructures and the recruitment of staff to implement status determination procedures, ways of providing temporary asylum and access for UNHCR officials to an international zone at Moscow's airport. Russia had always sought to comply with its obligations under the 1951 Convention and, despite the difficult relations among the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the internal migration situation, he believed that civilized standards in dealing with refugees had been maintained.

2. The Russian Federation was currently examining applications from around 3,000 displaced persons. In the first half of 1997, 350 had been processed and status had been granted, but, in 1998, it might be possible to deal with 100,000. In Moscow and St. Petersburg alone, preliminary interviews were planned for 8,000. That gave an indication of the potential dangers of an influx of 300,000 from neighbouring countries, a number that might rise significantly given the trend in flows from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Daily arrivals of Afghans and Tajiks in the Moscow region were creating major problems in terms of time, experts and resources.

3. UNHCR frequently assessed the status of asylum-seekers in the Russian Federation on the basis of information from its Office in Moscow. However, it appeared that many of the approximately 30,000 persons processed by the Federal Migration Service were not in touch with the UNHCR Office in Moscow and did not intend to apply for refugee status. They were apparently satisfied with their indeterminate status and the protection of UNHCR. It was time to resettle some of those people into other countries, a measure that would represent a translation of the principle of burden-sharing into real action.

4. UNHCR appeared not to have a clear understanding of Russia's laws on forcibly displaced persons and citizenship. As had often been explained, the criteria for granting status to forced refugees and displaced persons were similar to those applied in granting the status of internally displaced person. Anyone who voluntarily chose Russian citizenship lost the right to international protection. That approach was quite consistent with humanitarian standards and human rights and forced migrants who sometimes had no links to Russia through birth, origin or permanent residence were accepted

by Russia because they saw it as their new homeland. The scheme represented a durable solution, in UNHCR terminology, and had prevented more than one and a half million people from being left without citizenship, yet it had not been incorporated into UNHCR practice. The inclusion of those people in the category of forcibly displaced persons at the 1996 Conference on the CIS countries had brought about no fundamental change in terms of their reintegration or rehousing. Forcibly displaced persons did find refuge in Russia and his delegation would expect UNHCR to consider that group as representing a durable solution. He realized that delegations would need time to consider his comments and his own delegation had therefore not made specific proposals on international protection in the Executive Committee, but was in close contact with the Division of International Protection.

5. Referring to the question of statelessness, he said he hoped that UNHCR would be active in helping to improve legislation, particularly in States where the levels of statelessness were still unacceptably high. It was important to ensure not only formal adherence to the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, but also genuine compliance with it, and active dialogue and coordinated efforts were needed to do so.

6. Mr. GUBB (New Zealand) said that the emphasis in the Note on International Protection on the links between protection and human rights was a timely restatement of the principles underlying the international instruments on refugees. He welcomed the intensified cooperation between UNHCR and the other United Nations human rights agencies as part of the mainstreaming of human rights requested by the Secretary-General. New Zealand recognized the importance of practical activities aimed at strengthening local capacity to protect and promote human rights, including training programmes for government officials and the judiciary who dealt with refugees, and its official development assistance (ODA) had supported the establishment of national human rights institutions.

7. The abuse of human rights as a cause of displacement was nowhere more evident than in Kosovo and New Zealand had recently condemned civilian massacres there as "outrageous and totally without justification". He commended those countries that were sharing the burden by protecting some of the hundreds of thousands of Kosovars who had fled.

8. New Zealand was currently considering legislation that would give asylum-seekers access to fair and efficient status determination procedures by clarifying the process and giving it a statutory basis in domestic law. The bill also sought to balance that approach to genuine asylum-seekers with procedures to deal expeditiously with unfounded applications, which threatened to clog the system and undermine public support for the institution of asylum. He expressed appreciation for the advice given by UNHCR on the proposals.

9. In addition to considering asylum applications at its border, New Zealand was also committed to accepting a quota of 750 refugees per year for resettlement on referral from UNHCR and efforts had been made to streamline the procedures for accepting such cases.

10. Mr. WEIN (Austria) said that his delegation supported the Australian delegation's suggestion that the next annual theme should be "Strengthening

partnerships to strengthen protection on the ground". That would allow a continuation of the current session's discussion and provide an opportunity to discuss practical implementation for the benefit of those who really needed it.

11. Mr. IRUMBA (Observer for Uganda) said that, under the 1951 Convention, refugees had a fundamental right to seek asylum. An essential element of the institution of asylum was the principle of non-refoulement and he was concerned at attempts to narrow down the numbers of people who could benefit from protection. Although it was important to guard against the misuse of the institution of asylum, it was crucial that asylum-seekers should be given access to fair determination procedures and not be subject to arbitrary detention.

12. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the link between human rights and refugee law could not be overemphasized. States' primary duty was to promote and protect human rights through programmes to combat xenophobia and to strengthen their capacity to protect human rights within their own borders. Such measures provided a good environment for protection and for the improvement of refugees' well-being. Uganda had a Human Rights Commission that monitored the Government's compliance with its obligations under the relevant instruments and refugees had benefited from the Commission's enforcement mechanisms.

13. He stressed the importance of demilitarizing refugee camps. Removing armed elements from, for example, camps in the Great Lakes region would ensure that the civilian character of the camps was not compromised and that protection could be enhanced.

14. He welcomed the UNHCR outreach programmes and the dialogue it had been possible to promote at the Kampala meeting of regional leaders, organized by UNHCR and OAU.

15. He agreed that it was necessary to adopt an approach that advanced the work of the Standing Committee in a practical way so as to reach conclusions. However, it was not the process that was at issue; what was critical was the attitude and political will of member States with regard to fundamental issues. Only when those issues were tackled would it be possible to advance. One problem was the attempts that were being made to use the process to erode the principles of protection. If they continued, no amount of effort to improve the approach would move the work forward.

16. Mr. SINGH (India), speaking from the perspective of a developing country, one that cared for 300,000 refugees, most of whom had been in the country for decades, and that met the cost, which amounted to tens of millions of dollars per year, from its own resources, said that India's openness came partly from its tradition and partly from its commitment to humanitarianism. Its protection regime was based on fundamental rights that were guaranteed by the Constitution.

17. UNHCR and the international community must harness the strengths of human rights law in order to improve refugee protection. It was regrettable

that, despite the great progress made in the last 50 years in increasing respect for human rights, refugee law sometimes appeared to be moving in the opposite direction. Traditional generosity was being replaced by approaches based on partial solutions and diminished regard for refugees' welfare. Societies naturally wished to preserve their own prosperity, but building walls to shut out refugees was not the right solution. The majority of developing countries, despite their difficulties in meeting their own basic needs, had not shut their doors to their neighbours. Yet many contemporary initiatives in the field of refugee protection appeared to seek not to narrow the gap between words and action, but the reverse. It was important that faith in humanitarianism and the principles of refugee protection were not compromised by such initiatives.

18. Closing the gap between theory and practice was a challenge for the whole international community, not just for UNHCR, and it required political will for States to live up to their commitments on the protection of basic rights and the promotion of tolerance and harmony in a multicultural world. It might even be that policies that based resettlement, inter alia, on identity of language and culture would be a step in the wrong direction, i.e. towards exclusivism rather than pluralism.

19. He shared the concern of the Director of the Division of International Protection that the Executive Committee's conclusions were becoming regressive at a time when it was progressive development of the protection regime that was needed. It had been suggested that the negotiating procedure needed to be reviewed, but his delegation believed that the problem was rather one of political will and States' approach to conclusions. Executive Committee conclusions on international protection should enhance protection for refugees and support UNHCR activities. They should not be used to legitimize national practices that fell short of international standards or to promote individual priorities. UNHCR was about burden-sharing. His delegation was particularly taken aback by the idea that Executive Committee conclusions should avoid what had been described as negative language, even when major human rights violations were at issue. He called on all Committee members to take an approach that prioritized the interests of refugees.

20. Local integration was one of the three traditional durable solutions, but it had not been discussed by the Executive Committee recently. As a policy option for dealing with mass inflows of refugees to a developing country, it could not be discussed casually. It was unfortunate that a number of delegations had been unwilling to await a proper examination of the complexities of the issue and had insisted on a pronouncement by the Committee on the matter. Local integration was increasingly being equated with resettlement, yet there was no comparison whatsoever between the burden imposed on 10 or more developed countries by the resettlement of around 28,000 refugees and that imposed on one developing country by the local integration of millions.

21. Calls had been made for increased adherence, particularly by members of the Executive Committee, to the 1951 Convention. That could best be encouraged if the signatories to the Convention were to set an example by implementing it in letter and in spirit rather than challenging some of its fundamental assumptions.

22. Ms. CALLANGAN (Philippines) said that, as the question of refugee protection assumed global humanitarian dimensions, her delegation supported and appreciated the role played by UNHCR. The procedure used for reaching conclusions in the Executive Committee needed rethinking and the focus needed to be more on substantive humanitarian issues and less on polemics.

23. Ms. WASUM-RAINER (Germany) said that the primary responsibility for protecting refugees lay with States, but UNHCR nevertheless had a crucial role to play. Support for the work of UNHCR could best be expressed by a higher number of ratifications of the 1951 Convention. Germany recognized the difficulties which UNHCR was experiencing with regard to its protection mandate and expressed its continuing support for the traditional, durable solutions to refugee situations, with particular emphasis on voluntary repatriation. Future debates should focus on how to translate into practice the principles and standards agreed upon thus far. Her delegation appealed to all States to ensure greater relevance for the Executive Committee's conclusions with respect to protection of refugees.

24. Ms. JANJUA (Pakistan) said that Pakistan had been one of the countries visited during the "reach-out" consultations on the international protection mandate of UNHCR, which had proved to be a very useful exchange of ideas. UNHCR had played a major protection role in Pakistan ever since Afghan refugees had started to arrive in the country. Pakistan's open-door policy and its exemplary treatment of the refugees had been acknowledged by UNHCR.

25. Although much emphasis had been placed on the ratification of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the Executive Committee should also examine the protection provided by some countries which were not signatories to the two instruments. Thus, although Pakistan was not a signatory, its ongoing commitment to refugees' rights and respect for the principles of international refugee law should be acknowledged.

26. UNHCR should take every opportunity to sensitize international public opinion, especially in the developed countries, with regard to the enormous burden that refugee crises placed on developing countries. Taxpayers in the developed world needed to be convinced that they were not alone in shouldering the burden. The economic, social and environmental costs of refugee populations had to be quantified and Pakistan was prepared to be used as a case study in that connection.

27. The problem with regional arrangements was that they had a tendency to shift international responsibility to the regional level. Refugee protection was an international responsibility and could not be left to the regions.

28. Some delegations had described the process of formulating conclusions in the Executive Committee as "tortuous". While the process could indeed be reviewed, the problem lay not so much in the process itself as in the impossibility of reconciling restrictive national practices and legislation with the protection obligations arising from the Convention and the Protocol. There was a need for greater flexibility on the issue.

29. Her delegation was uncomfortable with the concept of local integration because the topic had not been discussed fully enough and because local integration would be impossible to implement in the case of massive refugee influxes. Voluntary return was the only viable option in such circumstances.

30. The Kosovo crisis and other similar situations demonstrated that humanitarian agencies were limited in what they could do to protect the human rights of affected populations unless the international community came together on all fronts to bring an end to such suffering. In that connection, her delegation was gravely concerned about the increasing threats being made against humanitarian personnel.

31. While appreciating the difficulties faced by asylum-seekers, her Government had always maintained that the real threat to asylum systems came not from an overload of rejected cases, but, rather, from increasingly stringent asylum laws and administrative bottlenecks. Administrative procedures needed to be streamlined and humanized instead of resorting to blanket rejection or denial.

32. Mr. McNAMARA (Director, Division of International Protection) said that he had taken note of the widespread support for consolidating protection activities within a firm legal framework and also of the endorsement for a strengthened accession and ratification campaign with regard to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. The overriding aim of such a campaign would be to ensure the implementation of refugee law and refugee principles in all their dimensions.

33. The Division would continue to pursue its "reach-out" programme within the limits of its resources and would expand it where possible. UNHCR regarded voluntary repatriation as the most appropriate solution to refugee crises, although resettlement was clearly a reasonable solution in special and vulnerable cases. In that connection, the Division welcomed the generous pledge made by Finland to the Resettlement Trust Fund and Norway's decision to increase its resettlement quota, as well as its offer to second personnel for UNHCR resettlement activities.

34. The Division had taken note of the concerns expressed by some delegations about the problems of protecting women and children and the central importance of family reunification. UNHCR shared those preoccupations and would strive to promote national legislation that would bring into force the right to family unity for all refugees. Protection of women and children should also be a high priority in programme planning; efforts were under way to improve response capacity by revising and mainstreaming the relevant protection guidelines and through intensified promotion and training at the global level.

35. Mixed flows of populations presented a number of challenges, such as problems of trafficking, undocumented arrivals and the return of rejected cases. The Division appreciated that the lack of documentation could make status-determination processes extremely difficult for States, but it was nevertheless concerned that lack of documentation per se was increasingly being linked to access to status-determination procedures. UNHCR had no

direct mandate to deal with properly rejected asylum-seekers, but it was clear that the non-return of rejected cases could negatively impact on the credibility and operation of asylum systems. UNHCR therefore conceded that it had a limited role to play in facilitating the return of refugees in specific and exceptional situations. Moreover, UNHCR was prepared actively and publicly to support the right of States to return properly rejected cases after due process.

36. Regarding the Executive Committee process itself, the Division welcomed the consensus on the need to reinfuse the conclusions with protection content and to depoliticize debates. The attitude of States might be more important than the process itself and the process should not be used to undermine principles.

37. The CHAIRMAN invited the Executive Committee to consider the work of the Standing Committee in respect of programme, administrative and financial matters, a detailed account of which could be found in paragraphs 4 to 13 of the report on the work of the Standing Committee (A/AC.96/910).

38. He took it that the Executive Committee wished to take note of the relevant work of the Standing Committee and was satisfied with the ongoing governance it had provided over UNHCR's activities and programmes.

39. It was so decided.

CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION OF PROGRAMME BUDGETS (agenda item 6) (A/AC.96/900 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and Add.2 and Corr.1 and Add.3)

40. The CHAIRMAN invited the Executive Committee to consider and adopt the programme budgets contained in the overview of UNHCR activities (A/AC.96/900 and Add.1-3). The relevant documentation had already been reviewed by the Standing Committee and its conclusions had been issued in the report of its 13th meeting (A/AC.96/909).

41. Mr. HOREKENS (Director, Division of Operational Support) said that the budget for the 1998 General Programmes had been approved in 1997 at a level of $440 million. That figure had recently been adjusted downwards to $429 million to take account of certain reductions in programme delivery and administrative support costs. The Standing Committee had been kept regularly informed of developments in the funding of the budgetary target and UNHCR had foreseen that it would not obtain full coverage of its 1998 General Programmes from a combination of fresh contributions and secondary income. In anticipation of funding shortfalls, UNHCR had therefore been using a working budget of $370 million, focusing on priority activities, scrutiny of support costs, post reductions and cutbacks in administrative expenditure. Nevertheless, the assessed needs of refugees remained at the level initially budgeted for and every effort would be made to achieve higher levels of funding. The revised budget for the General Programmes in 1998, for which UNHCR required the approval of the Executive Committee, was still $429 million, i.e. the adjusted amount approved by the Committee in October 1997.

42. The 1999 General Programmes target had been set at $413 million, which included a Programme Reserve of 10 per cent of programmed activities ($33.4 million) and Voluntary Repatriation and Emergency Funds of $20 and $25 million, respectively. Given the difficulty experienced in raising funds in 1998 for a General Programme target of over $400 million, the same scenario was likely to occur in 1999. The budget should perhaps have been set at a lower level. A realistic and manageable internal working budget would therefore be set in the light of income projections. The budget submitted for the approval of the Executive Committee was thus $413 million for 1999 General Programmes.

43. Similar difficulties had been encountered in respect of Special Programmes in 1998. Budgets had constantly been adjusted downwards, often at the expense of programme delivery and sound management. Compared with the total projected amount of $612 million which had been set in May 1997, the current amount allocated to Special Programmes was $550 million, including a major component of $180 million for operations in the former Yugoslavia and $85 million for the Great Lakes region in Africa (excluding $40 million for Rwanda). It was anticipated that $429 million would be required for Special Programmes in 1999. The total projected budget for 1999 would therefore be on the order of $840 million.

44. The Standing Committee had also examined the structure of UNHCR's budget and had acknowledged that some improvement was required. Following the submission of new proposals and a review of those proposals by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), the Standing Committee had agreed that additional consultations would be required to finalize a new budget structure, a prototype of which would be discussed and agreed upon for future use following a further review by ACABQ. A consolidated, unified budget would include all activities projected before the beginning of the programme year and would also include an operational reserve for use in emergencies and voluntary repatriation operations. Such a budget, which would be more transparent and predictable, could be in place by the year 2000. The new budget format would include new definitions of categories of expenditure under "Programme Support", "Management and Administration" and "Programme", a practice that was already used in other funds and programmes.

45. A workable mechanism and effective procedures for the prioritization of activities under the single budget structure would have to be developed in the coming months in consultation with member States. UNHCR was addressing that issue in the context of its ambitious review of programme management and the design and management of a new Operations Management System (OMS). The streamlined budget system would be complemented by an annual Global Appeal and a more focused and harmonious presentation of reports.

46. Mr. GÁNDARA GABORIT (Observer for Guatemala) said that UNHCR had played an indispensable role in facilitating the return of Guatemalan refugees to their homeland. A total of $300 million was currently required to complete the highly successful UNHCR programme in the region. Both UNHCR and the Guatemalan Government had striven to ensure that incoming funds had been used effectively and transparently. Very stringent financial controls were in place, thus demonstrating that UNHCR and its counterpart Government were

extremely responsible and cost-conscious. His Government appealed to all friendly countries to join with Guatemala in funding a programme to return and resettle Guatemalan refugees.

47. Mr. McGILL (Canada) said that the current year had been a difficult one for UNHCR financially and that had been coupled with the challenges of management reform. It was difficult to shift from a management culture based on growth to one based on contraction. It would therefore be critical for UNHCR to identify clear, strategic priorities for 1999 and to match them with realistic income projections. Canada was prepared to work with UNHCR and the other members of the Standing Committee to assist in establishing priorities and would endeavour to provide its 1999 core grant as soon as possible in its own fiscal year in order to contribute to greater funding predictability.

48. With respect to management reform, his Government had been encouraged by the work over the past few months under the leadership of the Director of Operational Support. The initiative to review the structure of the organization was positive and important. Action over a broad spectrum of topics was required to ensure that reform measures were implemented more effectively and in a timely manner. UNHCR's management culture, especially at the field level, needed to change. Recent informal consultations between the members of the Executive Committee and UNHCR on a unified budget structure, reintegration and the methods of work of the Standing Committee had been a productive mechanism and Canada encouraged their selective use in future. He looked forward to an early consultation on a revised proposal for a unified budget structure which incorporated the ACABQ recommendations.

49. Canada was sympathetic to the administrative burden placed on UNHCR by the differing reporting requirements of donors, but UNHCR needed to report better on the results of its programmes. A common reporting format was another issue that could benefit from informal consultations. UNHCR should also convene an informal meeting in the coming weeks to brief the Standing Committee on the results of the review of its evaluation function.

50. There was need for greater commitment within UNHCR, in particular at the field level, to the implementation of certain policy priorities that affected the quality of programmes. Those that dealt with refugee women and children were of key importance. He hoped that a new coordinator for women refugees, with the required experience and skills, would be selected as soon as possible. The implementation of the environment policy also required greater commitment.

51. Canada commended UNHCR on the nature and extent of its involvement in reintegration activities and noted the progress made in preparing an Operational Framework for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities in Post-Conflict Situations. It was, however, concerned that the office's role in reintegration should be for a clearly limited period of time and should be accompanied by well-defined exit strategies which included hand-over to the Governments concerned and other organizations. He commended the High Commissioner's efforts to enhance inter-agency cooperation in the reintegration of returnees in their countries of origin and hoped that her initiative in organizing a meeting with the World Bank in January 1999 would lead to concrete results and more effective working relations at headquarters

and in the field. In order to improve the functioning of the Standing Committee, it should further discuss the items on its work plan in December 1998 in order to develop strategic objectives and clear priorities over the next three years. The secretariat could then be asked to prepare a draft strategic work plan.

52. Mr. KALBITZER (Germany) said that the programme budget documents covered the activities of three different budgets: the closure of accounts for 1997, the current budget for 1998, with its revisions, and a draft of activities for 1999. Perhaps different documents should be issued for different years in order to enhance the clarity of the presentation. The budget format needed improvement. The documents for 1999 were correctly called an "overview" and not a draft budget. That was not only because of the imperfections in the budget format, but also because UNHCR's expenditures were very much dependent on donations, which varied a lot and often had all kinds of strings attached. Reserves could help, but could not solve that problem. The figures in the documents were therefore of a very indicative nature: should there be higher income than expected, expenditure would rise accordingly; and should income be lower, expenditure would fall. Under those conditions, it was very difficult to make a pronouncement on the draft.

53. Mr. SJÖGREN (Sweden), speaking also on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that the alarming decline in overall international aid, for both development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, had reflected on the funding of UNHCR. The Nordic countries remained committed to the 0.7 per cent level of gross national product in aid, as agreed to by the United Nations more than 25 years earlier. Contributions from the Nordic countries to UNHCR in 1998 amounted to some $124 million, making them the second largest donor. They intended to maintain a high level of contributions to the work of UNHCR, but believed that more equitable and broader burden-sharing in the funding of the Office's activities was a necessity for a balanced budget. The issue should be addressed in the context of the continued discussions on a reformed budget structure, which would enable donors to be better equipped to make timely contributions and thereby improve the predictability of UNHCR funding. Predictability of funding was also a prerequisite for cutting ongoing and planned activities in a rational manner, guided by priorities and needs and not by ad hoc funding gaps.

54. Although there had been a decrease in the past year in the population of immediate concern to the High Commissioner, the Nordic countries remained concerned about the extremely difficult and precarious conditions under which her Office had to undertake its responsibilities. They welcomed UNHCR's efforts to enhance training, particularly on security-related aspects, as well as the setting of standards for implementing partners through specific Operational Partnership Agreements. The evaluation of UNHCR's training activities to be undertaken during the second half of 1998, as recommended by ACABQ, was of particular interest to the Standing Committee.

55. The Nordic countries agreed with ACABQ's recommendation that a unified budget should be adopted, making a distinction between annual and approved budget, on the one hand, and supplementary activities, on the other. The prime merits of that reform would be better transparency on UNHCR's overall activities with ensuing improved accountability; better conditions for

planning and prioritizing within overall available resources and established priorities; better opportunities for a budget that was output-oriented and not limited to inputs only; and improved flexibility in meeting emerging needs and changing conditions on the ground. The Nordic countries welcomed the suggested harmonization between UNHCR and other United Nations agencies of the criteria for recording administrative and programme costs. They fully supported changes better to indicate the protection activities of UNHCR and encouraged the High Commissioner to give priority to the effective implementation of the established policy guidelines on refugee women and children.

56. The Nordic countries further welcomed the early and comprehensive presentation of the Global Programme needs, as suggested by UNHCR, and were encouraged by its efforts to improve standardized reporting. They urged it to give greater transparency to its evaluation work and welcomed the announcement that a review of the capacity and methods in the field of evaluation was being undertaken. The follow-up of that review should appear on the agenda of the Standing Committee for 1999. While supporting the annual external audits practised hitherto, they also recognized the General Assembly decision on biennial audits. A possible compromise could be to have annual financial audits and biennial, more comprehensive management audits.

57. Mr. IRUMBA (Observer for Uganda) said he agreed with ACABQ and previous speakers on the need to revise the budget format, and he would be happy to take part in consultations on the matter. He also agreed with the six priority areas of the change process. The financial tabulation of the priority areas should be more indicative, including a comprehensive review of resources, staff, software and hardware costs. Regarding the introduction of new technologies and UNHCR's wish not to use the integrated management information system of the United Nations, but to develop its own system, ACABQ had pointed out that there should be an appropriate systems development schedule and related costs, with target dates for delivery of the developed systems. Where development was contracted to outside companies, qualified staff within UNHCR must be available to monitor and manage all such contracted services. ACABQ had also stressed the importance of ensuring that a core staff should be dedicated to systems coordination and management and not encumbered with other activities. He hoped it was indeed the case that UNHCR was prepared for the Year 2000 software problems and would not come back with requests for extra costs.

58. He encouraged more staff training in order to cope with the changes under way. However, change should not be made for its own sake, but rather to produce better programme delivery; it should not become a bureaucratized structure protective of itself. New staff should be brought in despite cutbacks in order to provide the Office with fresh blood. Developed countries should consider financing junior professional officers from developing countries. He would be happy to participate in deliberations on a new budget structure.

59. Mr. THEVENAZ (Switzerland) asked about the reference in paragraph 36 of the overview of UNHCR activities 1997-1999 (A/AC.96/900) to the Senior Management Group as a "tool" at the Secretary-General's disposal for managing the United Nations system as one aspect of the reform. How were the functions

of that group defined, what exactly were its tasks and how was it related to the other tools at the Secretary-General's disposal? As to the reference in paragraph 39 to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, one of whose functions was the coordination of emergency humanitarian response, did not the term "emergency" cover both natural disasters and complex emergencies? In any event, the Coordinator's support was essential in dealing with both of those types of events, and should remain so.

60. Switzerland welcomed the new enthusiasm for a relationship between the humanitarian agencies and OCHA, as well as the increase in consultations and inter-agency groups, which could only strengthen humanitarian action, its coordination, consistency and resolve. It was in that spirit that the Emergency Relief Coordinator had accepted most of the recommendations of the Executive Committee for Humanitarian Affairs in order to give OCHA more room to manoeuvre in supporting coordination in the field. With regard to Project Delphi, did UNHCR have a timetable yet for when the database on protection would become operational?

61. In southern Africa, particularly in Angola, UNHCR had suspended its repatriation activities in June 1998 and the renewed fighting had put an end to the peace process. UNHCR had indicated that, owing to the lack of financing - 63 per cent of the appeal for $15.7 million having been covered as at 22 September 1998 - it would only just be able to provide assistance to the returnees. Within the framework of a special intervention plan, UNHCR also planned in mid-1998 to turn over to the Government all infrastructures that had been rehabilitated in the regions of return, particularly through the relations UNHCR had established with development agencies. What was UNHCR's experience in that field, how had the turn over been effected, to which partners and under what conditions? In relation to Somalia, UNHCR had indicated that its objective in 1999 would be the same as in 1998, namely, the continued reception and reintegration of returnees through quick impact projects. It was projecting some 76,500 returnees for 1999, similar to the 1998 figure. The security situation in the country did not seem to have improved, however, and a number of NGOs had already left. Were those projections for 1999 still valid and what was the status for 1998?

62. Mr. AKASAKA (Japan) said he shared the concern of other countries about UNHCR's declining financial resources and their adverse effect on programmes. The estimated 1999 budget was not encouraging and called for greater efforts. Despite his country's current economic difficulties, Japan was firmly committed to supporting UNHCR. Its 1998 contribution exceeded $100 million and more would be added later in the year where it was urgently required. In 1999 as well, his Government would make every effort to continue its financial support at a level not less than that of 1998.

63. As a major donor country, Japan was very interested in ensuring that its voluntary contributions were used efficiently and effectively. He therefore welcomed UNHCR's implementation of Project Delphi and the effort under way to prepare a comprehensive report and unified budget. Japan would take part in efforts to improve management practices.

64. Mr. HOREKENS (Director, Division of Operational Support) said that work was proceeding on the revised budget structure and UNHCR hoped to produce a

prototype by the end of the year for consideration first by the Standing Committee and subsequently by ACABQ. He thanked delegations which had expressed an interest in participating in those consultations, which would also relate to such issues as standardized reporting, the use of the global appeal as a funding mechanism, the predictability of funding and earmarking.

65. The overview of UNHCR activities (A/AC.96/900) submitted to the Executive Committee was indeed an overview, containing a number of tables and budgetary figures, rather than a draft budget. The budgets of individual regions were examined in turn throughout the year at Standing Committee meetings.

66. He fully agreed with the comments that had been made on sound management. A new Operations Management System (OMS) was being developed and a first draft should be ready by the end of the year.

67. UNHCR was firmly committed to maintaining high visibility for policy issues related to refugee women and children. Priority would be given in the months ahead to the task of mainstreaming those and environmental issues.

68. With regard to change management, UNHCR was not in the business of change for the sake of change and would avoid bureaucratizing the process. The small unit at Headquarters that was responsible for guiding the process had been integrated into the Division of Operational Support. It was working closely with all other units, particularly through an OMS Project Board and other mechanisms. As soon as the Operations Management System became a reality, the unit dealing with change would focus more on the monitoring of organizational development. Training was an important component of the change process, particularly in the areas of human resource management and financial management for field staff.

69. The decline in UNHCR resources would continue for some time to be a major concern. He thanked all those who had pledged continued financial support and indicated their intention to make early announcements of contributions. UNHCR relied on voluntary contributions and all it could count on when it commenced operations on 1 January 1999 were the pledges that donors made at the Pledging Conference and a very limited carry-over from 1998. He appealed again to member States and thanked them in anticipation for early announcements of contributions.

70. With regard to United Nations reform, the High Commissioner attended the meetings of the Senior Management Group. The Emergency Relief Coordinator was responsible for emergency humanitarian response, but natural disasters were dealt with in other parts of the United Nations system. UNHCR was fully committed to close cooperation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), particularly through the Consolidated Appeal Process and in field activities.

71. The protection database would form an integral part of the Operations Management System. Further consultations with experts to clear up technical problems would take place in 1999.

72. He would welcome a review of the working methods and documentation of the Standing Committee.

73. He had taken due note of the question concerning staff matters and would respond in due course.

74. Mr. FAKHOURY (Controller) said he had taken note of the support expressed by the representative of Sweden for maintaining the status quo of an annual audit, a preference that had also been expressed by several delegations attending the 13th meeting of the Standing Committee. As a compromise between that position and the proposed biennial audit, the proposal for an annual financial audit and a biennial comprehensive management audit was a sound one and would be discussed with the Board of Auditors at the earliest opportunity.

75. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft decision on administrative, financial and programme matters contained in document CN/DN/49/8.

76. The paragraphs concerning the proposed budgets levels for 1998 and 1999 related to paragraph 16 and table II.5 of document A/AC.96/900. He took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the 1998 revised General Programmes budget and the 1999 General Programmes target.

77. It was so decided.

78. The CHAIRMAN said he took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the whole of the draft decision on administrative, financial and programme matters.

79. The draft decision was adopted.

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT (agenda item 7) (A/AC.96/899, 901 and 901/Add.1 and 902)

80. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to document A/AC.96/899 containing the accounts for 1997, document A/AC.96/901 containing the report of the Board of Auditors on the accounts, document A/AC.96/901/Add.1 containing UNHCR's response to the report and document A/AC.96/902 concerning UNHCR's inspection and evaluation activities.

81. The detailed discussion of documentation relating to audit and oversight matters that had been held at the 13th meeting of the Standing Committee was summarized in the report on that meeting (A/AC.96/909) and reflected in the decision on administrative, financial and programme matters.

82. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service), introducing document A/AC.96/902, said that the High Commissioner had taken many initiatives to strengthen internal programme oversight and control since the beginning of her mandate. Her proposal in 1993 to create a post of Inspector-General for UNHCR had led to the establishment of the Inspection and Evaluation Service in early 1995. In 1997, an agreement had been signed with the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services providing, inter alia, for the financing by UNHCR of 15 auditor posts, including four stationed in the field. Other measures had included the recruitment of a

Senior Inspection Officer specializing in administrative and financial matters, the appointment of the Director of the Inspection and Evaluation Service as a focal point for investigations and the establishment of an internal Oversight Committee chaired by the Deputy High Commissioner, with a representative of the Office of Internal Oversight Services as an ex officio member. In 1998, inspection activities had been extended to include headquarters units as well as field operations, an external consultant had studied ways of enhancing UNHCR's investigation capacity, a post of coordinator for investigations had been approved and an external consultant service had assessed the evaluation function.

83. Between mid-1995 and the end of 1998, some 70 countries accounting for over 60 per cent of UNHCR's budget had been inspected. The High Commissioner had decided on appropriate follow-up in the light of the resulting reports (over 25). The third edition of the Inspection Handbook had just been completed and the database had been improved. The Inspection Unit had actively participated, at headquarters and in the field, in the post-by-post examination that had just been completed. Priority continued to be given to the in-service training of staff members of the Inspection Unit, but budgetary constraints were a major obstacle. Certain Governments had been approached with a view to drawing on their training facilities. In that connection, he thanked the Governments of the United States and France for their favourable response.

84. Despite its limited human resources, the Evaluation Unit had succeeded with the help of internal consultants in completing eight reports in 1997 and seven by the end of July 1998, including two jointly with the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The database originally intended for inspection follow-up had been extended to cover evaluation.

85. The consultant service that had been asked to assess the evaluation function had begun its study in early November and should complete it by early November. The consultant responsible for the study had already sought the views of a number of representatives of member States on the Executive Committee and international organizations and numerous UNHCR staff members. The report would be submitted to the High Commissioner and her recommendations would be analysed by the units concerned. A plan of action to improve the evaluation function would then be prepared and approved by the Senior Management Committee. The results of the study and plan of action would eventually be reported to the Executive Committee.

86. Without prejudging the conclusions of the study, he proposed the following improvements to the existing system: submission to the Executive Committee of the annual evaluation programme as approved by the Senior Management Committee; systematic distribution of synopses of all evaluations contained in the annual programme; availability, on request, of each full evaluation report; submission to the Executive Committee, as part of UNHCR's annual report on internal oversight activities, of a special section on follow-up to recommendations resulting from evaluations; and submission to the Standing Committee, in the context of periodic reports on regional developments and as in the past, of a review of evaluation activities concerning the region in question.

87. At the request of the Joint Inspection Unit, the executive summary of the study by the Unit entitled More Coherence for Enhanced Oversight in the United Nations System had been made available to participants in the session. The Unit stressed the importance of differentiating between internal and external oversight mechanisms and the fact that internal oversight findings should be reported first to the executive heads of organizations, for whom they were a vital management tool. According to the authors of the study, member States wanted more oversight and control, but were dissatisfied with the quantitative and qualitative results. Some, faced with the plethora of reports, had even complained of oversight indigestion.

88. Mrs. HELKE (United Kingdom) thanked the Director for the measures he was taking to improve the transparency of the evaluation system. She looked forward to receiving the findings of the assessment of the evaluation function.

89. Mr. IRUMBA (Observer for Uganda) said that Uganda had always emphasized the importance of the evaluation function and was pleased that the High Commissioner had put in place a properly staffed unit for the purpose, that its efficiency was to be assessed and that the High Commissioner herself recommended appropriate action on the resulting reports. A culture of evaluation should be promoted among all UNHCR staff members with a view to improving programme delivery and eliminating superfluous activities. While internal mechanisms were obviously necessary for internal oversight, they were no substitute for external assessments of programme delivery by, for example, the Board of Auditors or the Joint Inspection Unit.

90. Mr. KALBITZER (Germany) said that it was of the utmost importance to have an unqualified audit opinion, but it would be preferable if auditors' comments were few, brief and favourable. On accounting matters, it might be prudent to follow their advice, the advice of ACABQ and United Nations practice if only to avoid prolonged discussion. The fact that UNHCR had experienced difficulties in obtaining audit certificates might be seen as indicating a weakness in its operations, which would be a very serious matter. He had taken note of the fact that UNHCR would in future have an enhanced internal audit function which should make dealings with the external auditors much easier.

91. Mr. GÁNDARA GABORIT (Observer for Guatemala) emphasized the importance that all receiving countries attached to oversight and auditing. In that connection, an effort should be made to ensure that UNHCR's external audits covered all countries every year. As the external auditors had not visited Guatemala since 1996, he hoped that a visit could be arranged before the end of 1998. The Guatemalan Government had offered to cover the costs of the audit. He proposed that the Executive Committee should consider the possibility of contracting internationally recognized external auditors within member States in order to obtain a better overview of the use of resources in individual countries.

92. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service) said that, while there had been no recent external audit in Guatemala, an inspection of the Guatemalan operation had been undertaken by the UNHCR Inspection and Evaluation Service at the beginning of the year.

93. Mr. FAKHOURI (Controller), replying to the representative of Germany, said that UNHCR had not yet benefited from the comments of ACABQ on the Board of Auditors' report, since they were to be submitted to the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly on 5 November 1998. UNHCR would subsequently be in a position to act on ACABQ's advice, particularly on accounting standards.

MEETINGS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE IN 1998 (agenda item 8) (CN/DN/49/8)

94. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft decision on the programme of work of the Standing Committee in 1999 contained in document CN/DN/49/8. He took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decision.

95. The draft decision was adopted.

96. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft decision on observer participation in 1998-1999.

97. Ms. KOURULA (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that applications had been received from the Government Observer delegations of Kenya, Peru, Yemen and Zimbabwe for participation in meetings of the Standing Committee from October 1998 to October 1999. They should be added to the list contained in paragraph (a) of the draft decision.

98. The CHAIRMAN said he took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decision with the addition of four Government Observer delegations.

99. The draft decision, as amended, was adopted.

CONSIDERATION OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE FIFTIETH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 9) (CN/DN/49/9)

100. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft decision on the provisional agenda of the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee contained in document CN/DN/49/9. He took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decision.

101. The draft decision was adopted.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS (agenda item 10)

102. Mr. GOAGOSEB (Namibia) proposed that, at future sessions, issues relating to specific conflicts, for example, that between Eritrea and Ethiopia, should be addressed within a continental or regional framework rather than in the general debate on the annual theme. The Executive Committee should focus on humanitarian issues and avoid political discussions.

The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.